



Coping with a Critical Event

This information leaflet is intended to equip those who have been affected by a critical event or incident to understand and cope with possible reactions they might encounter. Although overwhelming reactions usually appear soon after the incident, even after seemingly inconspicuous events, some can take a few days, weeks or months to surface. Negative and positive reactions usually alternate, appearing either alone, in isolation or in various combinations.

Those reactions are appropriate and are typically normal reactions to abnormal circumstances. A recovery period of a few days is generally all that is required. Only about 20% of persons involved such an event might experience longer lasting symptoms.

However, should these reactions not improve significantly within 4 to 6 weeks, please consider seeking help. Prolonged reactions may reflect an underlying problem and more serious conditions could develop. In such a case, our support and that of our professional network may be of benefit to you.

The list below includes some possible and normal reactions which you may experience:

- 1) EMOTIONAL:** Mood swings, fear, guilt, helplessness, denial, insecurity, anxiety, dejectedness, intense anger, strong debilitating grief, panic attacks, agitation, irritability, feeling depressed, numbness of emotions, emotional outbursts, feeling overwhelmed, over reacting.
- 2) BEHAVIORAL:** Withdrawal from society, change in social activity, change in language use/ speech pattern, change in appetite, restlessness, sleeplessness, higher intake of stimulants, increased alcohol consumption, hypersensitivity, hyper-alertness, avoidance, uncontrolled movements, short temper, risk seeking (i.e., taking up perilous hobbies, seeking adrenaline rushes).
- 3) PHYSICAL:** Nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, onset insomnia or trouble staying asleep, muscle pains, increase in heart rate, breathing problems, breaking into sweat, dizzy spells, light headed, fatigue not refreshed by sleep, impaired vision, chills, headaches, high blood pressure, symptoms of shock, hyperventilation, weakness, chest pain, grinding of teeth.
- 4) THINKING:** Poor concentration/ memory, disorientation in relation to time and/ or people, short term memory loss, shorter attention span, higher/ lower reaction time, uncertainty, general confusion, nightmares, distrust, difficulty with decision making/ problem-solving, increased/ decreased awareness of surroundings, suspicions, blaming, negativity.

**For further support contact Mayday-SA on:
+27-12-333-6000 and ask for "MAYDAY"**



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HOW TO HANDLE YOUR OWN OR YOUR LOVED ONES' REACTIONS

Should one or more of the aforementioned reactions arise following an incident, it is normal and consequently there is no reason for undue concern. In order to alleviate the distress we recommend the following tips:

- 1) Exercise, but keep it moderate. i.e. **30 minutes with a pulse rate not exceeding 120 beats/min. Afterwards drink at least ½ liter water.** Exercise accompanied by the increased fluid intake will speed up your metabolism, allowing your body to discard the stress hormones faster. In general, when trying to reduce stress, pursue a low pulse rate activity, rather than a high rate, is far more beneficial.
- 2) Try to eat as you normally as possible. An increase in adrenalin levels contracts your stomach causing your appetite to disappear. **Eating small amounts at a time helps.** Setting a timer or asking someone to remind you to eat at 30 minutes intervals, and repeating this cycle 3 to 5 times, helps your appetite return.
- 3) Rest and Sleep are vital in speeding up your recovery. **Do not drink more alcohol than normal.** Alcohol decreases the dream phase of the sleep cycle (REM sleep). The less alcohol consumed, the faster you will recover and the less likely you are to become depressed. Limiting caffeine, high fat and sugar foods will also reduce your stress and anxiety levels.
- 4) **Identify coping mechanisms** which have helped you in previous situations. What helped previously, will assist you now. Make as many daily decisions as you can to build your sense of coping – even if you lack motivation initially.
- 5) **Trust your feelings.** Let your emotions out. Laugh, cry, scream, play. Talk to people, it is the best medicine. Do the things you love.
- 6) **Give yourself time to recover;** and do not make any life changing decisions during this time.
- 7) **Reach out and spend time with others;** people care!

Follow these recommendations and your hormone levels will return to normal, you will regain your regular sleeping pattern and, you can expect to return to your overall feeling of normality and coping more rapidly.

FOR FAMILY MEMBERS AND FRIENDS

- 1) Listen actively and attentively, even when the story is being told over and over.
- 2) Show empathy and support and spend extra time with the traumatised person – there is no substitute.
- 3) Empower people by allowing them to take control of their lives. They may be upset, but not incapacitated.
- 4) Avoid any comment which interprets or minimises the event ("it could have been worse" etc.).
- 5) Do not take anger and other emotional reactions personally. Respect the need for privacy.
- 6) Emotions will go up and down, take them emotions seriously. People need to work through their feelings.
- 7) Help with daily tasks (cooking, cleaning, child care etc.) Offer help even when not asked for directly.
- 8) Re-assure your loved one she or he is safe and be patient, full recovery might take up to 8 weeks.